

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CHAPLAIN
COLONEL

MICHAEL HOYT
(VIA TELECONFERENCE)

SUBJECT: IRAQI INTER-RELIGIOUS CONGRESS

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MODERATOR: Chaplain Mike Hoyt, who is the command chaplain for the Multinational Force-Iraq, is joining us with bloggers roundtable this morning.

And, Chaplain Hoyt, did I get that correct?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: You did, yeah.

MODERATOR: All right, sir.

Do you have an opening statement for us, something kind of to get us started?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Well, I'm honored to be a part of your blogger thing today. Thank you very much for taking the time to include us in the process. I've served as a senior chaplain for U.S. forces in Iraq. And I think that the subject today is over this recently concluded Inter-religious Congress in Iraq. Is that correct?

MODERATOR: Yes, sir, it is. With all the activities that have been going on in and around Iraq and Baghdad recently with the bombings and what have you, we find it should be an interesting topic this morning.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Well, it's probably different from the melee that's going on around here. So at least we'll have a more gentle topic to talk about.

MODERATOR: (Laughs.) All right, sir.

With us on the phone this morning, we've got Grim with blackfive, Andrew Lubin with ON Point, Marvin Hutchins with Threatswatch, and Charlie Quidnunc with the Whizbang Podcast.

And gentlemen, as we move into the question and answer phase, please, when we get started here, state your name and your organization so we'll know who you are and be able to conduct the interviews properly here.

And if you're ready, Colonel -- Chaplain, we'll be starting our question and answers if you're ready.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Go right ahead, sure.

MODERATOR: All right.

Grim, why don't you get us started?

Q Yeah, this is Grim of blackfive.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Hi Grim.

Q Chaplain, one of the questions that I hear a lot from the public is why has some of the new counterinsurgency stuff -- why have some of these other steps taken so long to get here? Why couldn't we have done it a couple of years ago? I've often wondered how much we've been waiting on the evolution of our own doctrine versus the -- how much we've been waiting on the Iraqis to get where they need to be in their -- in, you know, in kind of their mind-set?

Can you talk a little about the Inter-religious Congress, how it compares to previous attempts at religious reconciliation, and how much of it has been, you know, we maybe needed to do more and how much has been that we've been waiting on them?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Okay. I've been in Iraq only since June of 2006. I came under OIF1 back in 2003 for a little while and then redeployed. So I don't have a long history to be able to say, how does that compare to other reconciliation conferences except the research I've been able to do in preparation for this one.

So I really can't tell you how it compares. I can tell you that first that this conference -- congress actually produced, which is sort of a comparative statement. But beyond that, I can't give you a whole lot of other comparative analysis.

One of the reasons I think it's taken as long as it has -- I began this initiative in July of '06. (We ?) tried to get the conference done as early as November of '06, and then we tried again in December, we tried again in February, we tried again in May and it got moved for the fourth time to the first two weeks in June. All kinds of issues kept popping up. We had a lot of funding issues. We had visa problems, getting delegates back and forth, transportation. We had major security issues. Lots of things kept coming up to interrupt this event. And finally we just persevered like wild men and nothing was going to stop us on this one, and we got the funding lined up and we were actually able to pull it off.

So that's a little bit of the generalized statements of why it took so long. The need to do this has been recognized at least since my tenure, July of '06. It's just been a very painstaking, problematic thing to get accomplished. This country is under tremendous stresses and strains. The government is under tremendous stresses and strains. To try and get anything done is a protracted process, and it's always interrupted by guys that don't want to see success occur here at all. And so it's frustrating. But the good news is it happened and we're on the way for some possible success.

Q Where did the funding come from?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Funding came from the Department of Defense -- the U.S. Department of Defense.

Q Not from State or anybody like that?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: No.

MODERATOR: All right, that's interesting.

And, Andrew.

Q Yeah, Padre, good morning. Andrew Lubin from ON Point.

Reading the bullets that Jack Holt sent out, looking at religious tolerance, but with the bombing of the mosque last week and the retaliatory bombings I think of either five or seven Sunni mosques destroyed in the last few days. Nobody in this group has stood up and said, "Hey, folks, that's wrong."

Where does religious tolerance end? Or why don't you people who are happy to put their signature on a piece of paper stand up on Iraqi TV and say, "Folks, this isn't right.

This isn't what we're about"? Or is that never going to happen in the Arab world?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: No, I think you're a little bit misinformed there. That precisely has happened over the last three days. In fact, the morning that we adjourned the conference was the morning that the minarets that were still standing at the golden mosque were destroyed. And cell phones were going off like crazy with the delegates who were standing nearby, and they were immediately informed from their people what had just happened.

And right there, prior to them going on the press conference, they got together -- got their statement together, and every one of them appealed to their constituency for calm, to not retaliate, to wait until we got to the bottom of this, let's figure this out, let's hold off, let's not escalate. And they didn't.

Muqtada al-Sadr -- the leading Sadrist here himself has said that same thing: we're not going to escalate. In fact, he's called for a peaceful march/demonstration from Baghdad to Samarra as a protest of these kinds of attacks. Al-Hakim, one of the major Sunni leaders, has done the exact same thing and asked for a major peace march to occur in the very near future.

So everybody that is in a leadership position of Iraqi clerics has stated categorically over the last several days, we don't want to take this out to a sectarian solution. We need to stay banded together. This was an assault on all of us when one religious thing is attacked; let's keep it together. That has been very good.

Q But Padre, in the last two days -- or not including today, so this is Thursday - - so Tuesday and Wednesday you have either five or seven Sunni mosques destroyed. If that's their idea of restraint, then I -- that's still an awful lot of mosques destroyed in

retaliation. Has -- who's stood up and said, "Hey, folks we asked you to stop. What's going on here?"

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Well, I'm not sure that retaliation is the right word to use here because no one has claimed responsibility for the destruction of those mosques.

Q Well --

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: And the people who have spoken have spoken to their constituency asking them not to do it. So if there's enough criminal and al Qaeda and Islamic army guys running loose in this country to wreak any level of havoc that they want to continue to try and spark some type of sectarian response. This country is not in control.

Q Okay. But I mean, surely this isn't the Sunnis blowing up their own mosques. This has got to be -- well, okay. It kind of sounds -- to be honest with you, it's like we're parsing words here -- because nobody said we did it, it almost didn't happen. But it did, and it's getting worse, not better.

CHARLES HOLT: Well, and if I may interject, this is -- excuse me here, sir -- this is Jack Holt. And if I may interject this here, you know, one of the issues is that the enemies of Iraq in the country there are looking to stoke that sectarian violence, and they will do whatever they can to get one side against the other. And you know, we've seen that in the past.

MODERATOR: Marvin, your turn. Your question.

Q Yes. Given the last question relating to the reprisals and that sort of thing, from our perspective it looks as if there is a much lower level of violence this year after the attack on the shrine than there was, say, last year. And I was wondering if the colonel believes that the inter-religious folks coming out and saying their pieces played a bigger role in it, or is it the actually security -- the security forces from the Iraqi government and our own operations that have done -- that have had a greater impact?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: The Iraqi Inter-religious Congress is not the silver bullet; it's a part of the ammunition belt used to help stabilize this country. I saw the delegates. I heard the messages. I know some of them. I know what they're doing now and what they're saying to the people. And I have to believe that their message is having some level of decisive impact on the restraint of violence.

So, you know, good for them. And whatever advantage that brings for peace is what we've been trying to do all along, and I commend it. I'm glad to see it.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Thank you, sir.

MODERATOR: Charlie Quidnunc.

MR. QUIDNUNC: Hi, Colonel. This is Charlie Quidnunc with the Whizbang Podcast.

I have a question about what reconciliation do you see going forward? Are there going to be more conferences where these people are brought together? What are your plans to try to help out on this?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Great question, thanks. First of all, this is a government of Iraq initiative. This was not an MNF-I initiative. And it was facilitated by a nongovernmental organization named the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East. And the guy that actually helped pull this all together was a guy named Bishop -- he's not a bishop; rather, Canon -- he's Anglican Church -- Andrew White, who's the bishop of Baghdad, the Anglican Church of Baghdad, St. George.

And so this has always been presented to the government from the start. Former Prime Minister al-Ja'afari is the one that actually asked Andrew to take this on as an initiative back in February of 2006. Prime Minister Maliki confirmed his support for it in September of '06, and we've been working, as I said, continuing with the national security adviser month by month to try to get this thing done.

The point is, it was never introduced as a one-up event. It's part of a process, a prolonged process. It's supposed to be four separate meetings within one year that occur generally once a quarter but, kind of depending on the events and the funding available, to build this grassroots religious leader voice so that the government of Iraq and the religious leaders of Iraq, who are extremely influential in politics and the implementation of government decisions, could have a platform to establish a dialogue between each other so that success could begin to break out.

So, yes, there are at least three other conference -- national- level, strategic-level conferences -- planned. There are a host of regional-level conferences that will occur at the strategic directive of some of the national leaders from al-Sistani's office, from the Islamic Scholars Group, and they will occur across the country.

So hopefully, as a result of getting this off the ground, we have now left the diving board and we're launching out into an opportunity to really build off of something. Before there just wasn't anything to build off of. Now there is. So where it's going to go is anybody's guess, but it couldn't have gone anywhere had this not occurred. So I'm very optimistic about the possibility.

MODERATOR: All right, sir. Any follow-up questions?

Q I have a follow-up question. This is Grim of blackfive.

I would like to ask you, sir, what it's like working with the dominantly, almost at this point exclusively, Muslim establishment in Iraq and to what degree they accept dealing with un-Muslim holy men such as yourselves.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: If you mean the establishment, if you're referring to the clerics -- is that who you're referring to?

Q Yes, the religious establishment, not the government.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Yeah. Great question. And I was surprised myself. In fact, I did not believe it to be the case. Now that I've lived it for a year, I'm convinced. But initially I came into this process with Andrew back in July of '06 because we just had a mutual acquaintance, as fellow ministers of our faith groups, and he was preaching at the embassy, where I also have some responsibilities, and we began talking together. "Hey, maybe we can partner with this." And MNF-I liked the idea of trying to do anything to help reduce sectarian violence. At that time we were spiking pretty bad in the summer. So we began this partnership.

As it evolved, what kept coming up from these religious leaders was they wanted to engage with an American clergyman, because this was a religious issue and they wanted to talk to what they decided was their religious counterpart. It had to be a guy with some status. They didn't just want to talk to any old body.

So they decided that the senior chaplain in Iraq would be the guy that they wanted to engage with, because that position represented for them the leading religious leader for the coalition forces. And it has been amazing. I've had hard discussions, disagreements over and over with them, as well as very positive agreements. And being a soldier, there has not been a problem.

It's very interesting. I've heard them lambaste the coalition and praise the coalition, independent of the fact that I was part of it; it didn't make any difference. It was just part of their religious understanding of what they needed to get out and what they wanted to say.

We've had some very frank discussions because we are mutually -- they view me as a fellow religious leader. Every once in a while we'll talk a little bit of theology, but not much. That's not the issue. It's do you have the credential as a cleric and can you do something with it. I do, and they're satisfied with that. I've been very surprised at that.

Q Sir, that's very interesting.

MODERATOR: Any other questions?

Q Yes, Padre, Andrew Lubin again from ON Point.

Can you tell us, please, who signed this agreement and what their -- when I say credentials, I don't mean to denigrate them. We don't know much about the Iraqi religious hierarchy. Who are these people and why were they picked?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Okay, thank you. The delegates were picked by the faith groups themselves or the sects -- the Sunni, the Shi'a, the Christian, the Yezidi, the Kurds. They picked their own representatives, and they chose representatives, from their perspective, who have a national level of influence. They have a national voice with the Sunni or Shi'a or Christian or Kurd or Yezidi population in this country.

We had representatives from Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's office, at the Hausa in Najaf. We had the co-chairman and general secretary of the Iraqi Scholars Group, which is the largest Sunni group in Iraq. We had the head of the Christian religious authorities here in Iraq and the senior evangelical pastor for Baghdad. We got the speakers of Sinia (ph) mosques in Baghdad and in Basra and in Tikrit.

So we had people who have a large audience with a voice to make a difference, and those are the guys that came. We didn't -- we also had 11 Council of Representatives members from the government. We had the minister of human rights from the government. We had representation from Vice President Hashemi's office.

We had Prime Minister Maliki's personal adviser and religious leader, Dr. Adel al-Shurra (ph), who signed the prime minister's name on the accord, which is a first. And so we had representation -- the largest representation of faith groups and geographic dispersion from north, south, east and west in Iraq at a religious conference in 37 years. It was a pretty historic event.

Q How many people signed? How many people attended?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: There were 55 delegates that came in and out of the two-day conference. And I never did count up all of the ones that signed, so I don't have an exact number for you. I know all of the senior representatives, the decision-makers, who were empowered to speak on behalf of their constituents. Every one of them signed. Now, some of their junior delegates didn't, and didn't need to; their bosses did.

Q Would it be possible to get you to send to Jack Holt's office the name of the senior delegate who signed for the Shi'a, Sunni, Kurd, Christian and Azeri groups, I guess the main groups in Iraq, those five?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Well, there are others, but those were the ones that attended the conference.

Q Okay. Can we possibly get the names?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: You know, that's a good question. We were talking about that a little while ago. This is an Iraqi government initiative, and I want to be

sensitive to Iraq lead on this. I'm not sure that I -- I would have to go to the government and ask them what they want to do about this. I don't want to just be taking names off and sending them out.

I'll tell you this. Every one of the guys that attended -- not every one, but many of the guys that attended this thing attended against personal property and death threats to them. And seven of them were targeted immediately upon return, and one of them was beat up three days before the conference.

These guys knew what they were getting into, and they have taken a pretty heroic stand. And being here at the conference was not an easy decision for any of them. So when they put their names on this paper, they had already paid a price and now are paying a price even more.

That's why I'm not so sure that the government necessarily wants this to be hugely public at this point. We'd prefer to have a little bit of success and keep it moving properly than to jeopardize some of the leaders who are living against a threat for even trying to do -- (inaudible) -- getting back to the question.

Q But has this been publicized in Iraq, then?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: It has, yeah. There are 11 Iraqi Arabic channels and pan-Arab news both pre- and post-conference. Now not everybody wanted their face on camera, but they chose spokesmen. And in fact, some of those guys are the ones that were targeted, so --

Q Okay, thank you.

MODERATOR: All right, anybody else - anything else?

Q Yes, Colonel, this is Charlie Quidnunc with Whizbang.

I have a question. We hear about the need for reconciliation. We've heard about it for quite a while. But this conference is the first solid step that I've ever been made aware of. With all the political pressure in Washington, do you think the Iraqis will be able to show more progress on reconciliation before General Petraeus' September report to Congress?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Well, that just remains to be seen. You know, it's an open question. These guys are under huge amounts of pressure. I'm not making excuses; I'm just saying what they've got to put up against. Yeah, I'll just have to see. There's no way I can predict that. We've got a good start here. We've made a significant historical move. There's every opportunity available now to take and seize it and move out.

But frankly, it's not the only thing on this government's plate; it's just trying to survive right now. And you know, we'll just see if we can get a voice loud enough and

good enough to actually make something happen, or if it's kind of overwhelmed by other events that are also of a national and international strategic importance. We're doing the best we can and we'll just see where it goes.

Q Thank you.

MODERATOR: All right, sir. And I know you've got other engagements this morning and that it's -- but it sounds like the religious conference was a good solid start in making some progress in Iraq.

And do you have any closing comments for us, sir?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Well, let me just tick off to you, if I could, the firsts about this accord, if I may.

MODERATOR: Certainly.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: The agreement was the first of its kind to receive the personal endorsement of the prime minister. And we actually met with the prime minister on Monday, the first day of the conference, in a private meeting with him at his office. He was overwhelmingly supportive of this event, and as I mentioned earlier, sent his personal spiritual adviser and leader to sign for him on the night of the accord signing on the 12th of June.

It's the first broad-based religious accord to support and recognize the legitimacy of the government of Iraq, and to call for the integration and action of the Iraqi government on all previous and future tribal and religious conferences to achieve reconciliation.

So -- and the question was asked earlier, are we going to build some momentum here? Yes, and we're asking the government to reach back into the other reconciliation conferences that have occurred this year at tribal levels that were not religious in nature to see what we can bring forward out of them into an overall package of reconciliation.

It's the first accord to document public -- to publicly renounce al Qaeda by name, and to publicly declare that the spread of arms and unauthorized weapons is to be viewed as a criminal act in Iraq. It's an anti-armed-gang/militia kind of statement.

It's the first religious accord that provides a way ahead for a committed public action by religious leaders to denounce violence, to deny terrorism, to demonstrate support for democratic principles and the constitution, and to display national unity.

And it's the first religious accord to be facilitated by a nongovernmental organization with the coordinated support of the United States mission in Iraq and multinational forces.

So there's a lot of firsts in this thing, pretty dramatic statements that are hanging it out there. Now we're just going to have to build on it.

MODERATOR: All right, sir. Fascinating.

And then we'll be looking forward to some more information, and hopefully you can join us again later as -- at least as -- (inaudible). And from what I understand, you've been in-country just about a year now?

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Little over a year, yeah. I'm on the extended family plan, so -

MODERATOR: (Laughs.)

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: -- couple more - couple more months beyond.
(Laughs.)

MODERATOR: (Laughs.) All right, sir. Well, thank you very much for joining us today, and hopefully we can speak again. And we do appreciate it, sir.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: Well, thank you for your -- particularly to the bloggers here who participated and the good, hard questions. I appreciate their going after it.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, sir.

Q Padre, you'll forgive us. We appreciate it.

CHAPLAIN COL. HOYT: No problem.

Q Thank you.

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